

Activism in Transition: Social Media Activism and the Contentious Politics of Social Change

Research Thesis

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by

Katelyn Aberl

The Ohio State University

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Project Advisor: Professor Wendy Smooth, Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality  
Studies

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## Abstract

Online spaces have changed the way new generations of activists interact with their communities and get involved in movements for resistance. Using social media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram, internet users engaged in social issues have called into question how we think about activism and leadership roles in movements. While some uplift the potential of social media to democratize knowledge production in activism, some seek to delegitimize it. Despite the fact that traditional and social media activism share many similarities in their work, social media activism is harshly compared to traditional activism and given the name ‘slacktivist.’ This research project takes a look into the differences and commonalities between traditional and social media activism, and looks into where claims of slacktivism are based. From that discussion, I argue that social media activism should count as real activism, contrary to the views of those who agree with the claims of slacktivism.

## Preface

Although I first began using social media in 2007 with MySpace, I did not regularly engage on social media until I discovered Tumblr in 2010. At first, my Tumblr was a space of self-expression for the high school sophomore who had an obsession with young adult fiction and Dutch metal bands.

At the time, the general rule of thumb on Tumblr followed a modified version of the rules of Fight Club; namely, you do not talk about Tumblr outside of Tumblr. To follow someone you knew in your life offline was taboo, as was telling someone offline to get a Tumblr. Users treated the space like a secret, all exclusive club. These rules were necessitated by frequent server crashes that would cause users to lose their place while scrolling through their dash or losing all the work done on a post. Much of how Tumblr users used Tumblr was directed by its own dysfunctions, which had an untended but wonderful consequence. On Tumblr, the people you followed could be anywhere in the world, and could be anyone, each bringing their own unique perspectives to issues that went viral. As I followed more people and my network grew across borders, I increasingly came across blogs whose self-expression included regular posts on feminist topics.

Before Tumblr, my first exposure to feminism was a YouTube video shown in my American history class, which asked people in a public space if they were feminist. My next run in with feminism was through Lorraine Murray's book, *Confessions of an Ex-Feminist*, which was required reading in my all-girls Catholic high school's "Theology of the Body" class. The conclusions I drew from these experiences were that feminism was a confusing thing that people didn't really understand and which only targeted women's right to have sex all the time. As a relatively isolated high school girl not interested in having sex any time soon, I did not think

feminism was something that could make sense of my life and experiences. At the time, it seemed rather unlikely that I would ever make a commitment to feminist politics.

I do not think it is possible to learn in isolation; rather, education is a community effort that requires discussion and collaboration. As a painfully shy girl on and offline, I did not explore Tumblr and find feminism by myself. Similar music interests helped me to find my closest friend, Hassan. As I scrolled through my dashboard in the basement of my family's home in Ohio, he scrolled through his in New Jersey. As he branched out and talked to different people on Tumblr, he would share blogs he liked with me and we began to talk about the content of them. Together, we worked through and discussed feminist topics, and built a valuable friendship that continues to this day.

By 2012, the networks I interacted in were mostly radical feminist women of color who posted about feminist topics transnationally. Although I began in a liberal feminist mindset, 2012-2013 became a year of intense feminist education, and by 2014 I was, and still am, committed to radical feminist politics. This commitment soon came offline and has become something I carry with me every where I go in every action and conversation.

I began at the Ohio State University as a transfer student majoring in philosophy in 2015. Through my RA in the dorms, I learned that there was a major called "Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies." This obviously caught my interest and I soon added WGSS to my philosophy major. As I have progressed through the WGSS and philosophy programs, the work I do in each has become inextricably linked. Often the only woman in the class, I become the feminist voice in my philosophy classes, writing scathing analyses of Plato's *Republic* in a feminist lens.

I am a woman philosopher, a feminist philosopher, and I now take my voice to social media and talk about being a feminist, woman philosopher in a white male dominated space. On

my blog, I have discussed women's contributions to theories of race, gender, and disability in philosophy, as well as uplift the stories of women philosophers who have devoted their lives to activism. My most popular post to date briefly tells the stories of Angela Davis and Grace Lee Boggs, both women of color who have committed their lives to activism and who became philosophers in times when people of color struggled for the right to a higher education, nevertheless join a field which remains the most exclusive in the humanities to this day.

As a senior preparing to graduate in just a few short weeks, this past semester has been one of reflection with a heavy dose of nostalgia. I can't help but see the way my life has developed thus far as a big accident, and one of the biggest and best accidents has been becoming a feminist. However, it's an accident that would not have happened without social media. The lessons I learned on media transformed my life within a few short years, and has left me with a social support group that I would not otherwise have. Needless to say, social media has been an influential space of activism for me.

Along my journey to this thesis, I have encountered many accusations of slacktivism. I first began to understand what the term meant as a writing center tutor at Cleveland State University, where a client brought in a paper on the topic. Perplexed by the term, I slowly started to notice it more and more as it was used against those I was learning with on social media. Women often received messages on Tumblr telling them that if they wanted the world to change so badly, they should get off the internet, stop being slacktivists, and join the real world. With the accusation of slacktivism, the people sending these messages claimed that the labor of feminist bloggers was useless, had no influence in the real world, and was a way to feel good while doing essentially nothing.

These messages did not make sense to me. It did not make sense to me that something that had been so transformative in my life could ever be considered useless and ineffective. Additionally, as I worked to build my own platform online, I could not even imagine how the work these women did was easy, or ‘nothing.’ After a few short months, I had abandon my project in uplifting women feminist philosophers, as it was real, hard work that I did not have time for while working two jobs and being a fulltime student. I came to conclusion that ‘slacktivism’ was no more than the manifestation of people threatened by the work of feminist activists online, and became inspired to defend activists online from these accusations.

I do not think that my story of the accidents that led me to feminism and the term ‘slacktivism,’ as well as my inability to see social media activism as having no influence, is a unique one. In fact, I have heard my same experiences echoed in the voices of my classmates in WGSS, who also credit social media as turning point for them in their feminism. As technology becomes more entrenched in our lives, I believe that more of the daily work we do will take place online and utilize online spaces as tools in meaningful ways. With time, my story will become even less unique as it is today, and I believe this is reason for the world of activists and feminist scholars to pay attention. That is what I attempt to do in the work that follows, and it is our stories that build the motivation guiding this project.

## Introduction

Online spaces are becoming increasingly prevalent in our daily lives, and social media sites along with them. Social media changes how we build relationships and engage in our education, and these spaces are also changing how activists approach their work. When over half of internet users also use social media sites (Pew 2013), social media offers the potential to reach great numbers of people in almost instantaneous communication. Additionally, considering that social media users are in the 18-29 age range, social media will only become more and more integrated with our lives over time and as younger generations take our place. For this reason, it just makes sense that new movements for resistance are going online.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram are opening new ways of getting involved in activist causes. The Egyptian revolution showed social media's potential to mass organize and act as a planner for protests (Gerbaudo 2012). Likewise, movements against police brutality in the US are showing social media's important potential for journalism. However, given how new social media platforms are and creators and users alike are still developing how we use them, the possibilities social media opens to activists has yet to be fully realized. Despite this, there is much room to further anticipate what social media can do for social justice organizing.

As social media is redefining how people engage with communication, there is also an expectation that social media will create spaces for those whose voices are heard and amplify a greater number of those whose voices have been ignored. Of all internet users, 71% of those on social media sites are women. Additionally, 72% are Hispanic and 68% black. Those engaging in social media tend to have lower income, less education, and are more likely living in urban areas, the more people are engaging on social media (Pew 2013). As women, people of color,



and those from lower socioeconomic classes have historically and currently been barred from spaces where they can be heard, the potential of social media to uplift their voices is one to celebrate.

In addition to uplifting the voices of the historically silenced, there is the potential for social media to also help to address problems that have unfortunately occurred in movements for social justice. Through opening up lines of communication, social media has the potential to redefine leadership and democratize activist movements.

Although social justice organizing has the main goal of eliminating oppression, that does not mean that movements have been perfect in avoiding the established hierarchies in their societies. Ever since the beginning of the feminist movement in the United States, conversations and gains around women's liberation have disproportionately privileged white women (Newman 1999). The Black Panther Party and the Brown Berets, while fighting against white supremacy and colonization, reenacted hierarchies of gender within their communities (Matthews 2001, Espinoza 2001). Through history, this has created white and male leaders within movements in the US and has ignored the contributions of women of color. The potential for social media is that it can aid in addressing this exclusivity of historical leaders and democratize activist spaces.

Although there is hope that social media can help organize activist movements that redefine notions of leadership and democratize movements, activism on social media is already facing challenges despite how new it is. For example, although #BlackLivesMatter was created by three black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the hashtag has been associated more with black male victims of police brutality and has also been appropriated by other movements. Garza, Cullors, and Tometi's names have been lost in the shuffle. (Garza 2014) However, this does not mean that social media organizing is necessarily destined to repeat

history. As social media opens spaces for hearing marginalized voices, the the attempts to silence activists can be resisted by organizing and calling attention to the risks it presents to social justice goals.

With everything that social media gives activism the potential to do, it stands in tension with the established oppressive hierarchies as well as the traditional strategies used by social movements to abolish those hierarchies. With that tension, movements that use social media as a tool for organization and communication have been charged with being ineffective, without set goals or leaders, and have been accused of “slacktivism.” It is around these issues that this project focuses. Through establishing what social media activism is and delineating its goals, its potential for diversifying leadership, its contrasts from traditional activism, and how it responds to accusations of slacktivism, I make a case for the importance of social media in activism in expanding knowledge production and conceptions of who can lead that hamper traditional activism and social movements.<sup>1</sup> In this project, I argue that online activism, social media activism in particular, does accomplish set goals and is an engaged form of activism, contrary to the views of those who charge social media activism with claims of slacktivism. Further, I argue that slacktivism is ultimately used as a tool of repression to intimidate and curtail the voices of those who are traditionally marginalized as knowledge producers.

## Online Activism and Social Media

### *Defining Online and Social Media Activisms*

Online spaces for activism can have very different goals and methods, and to this end, I am using the term ‘social media activism’ to describe a subset of online activism rather than act

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<sup>1</sup> As I began my project, I had originally wanted it to be a transnational analysis. However, given the media’s emphasis on Western issues and the prevalence of #BlackLivesMatter in the literature, this project does have a heavy focus on Western activisms, American in particular.

as a synonym. In both online and social media activism, the movements are built out of interactions between people with similar ideals, and online spaces are then used as a mode of communication for those ideals. In this way, social media activism is a kind of online activism. However, social media activism can be distinct from other kinds of online activism.

The location of interaction then becomes important in the distinction between online activism and social media activism. For example, online activism that is connected to more traditional movements first takes place offline and is then moved online through the construction of a webpage. Social media activism, on the other hand, is developed through interaction online. Just like traditional activist movements can begin offline and move to a space online, social media activism can move offline and resemble traditional movements.

In this project, ‘online activism’ refers more generally to activism that takes place on any online space, but also more specifically to groups that have an online presence while being part of a more traditional movement. The goals of these sites of activism are largely to inform through news postings and resource collections, as well as to state the mission of the group. For example, the Electric Intifada is a journalism based webpage that reports on resistance in Palestine and its support worldwide. Similarly, SisterSong’s space online is a website to share their mission statement and define their goals and efforts by women of color for reproductive justice, as well as make information about their board, members and team available among other interactions.

Further, having a presence on social media does not make that activist group part of social media activism. For example, SisterSong communicates to followers through Twitter, but SisterSong is not a social media activist group. This is because I am defining ‘social media activism’ as efforts by activists that are built on social media sites, with a focus on relationships

and community building across borders. This community is often built through the use of hashtags, and for this reason, feminist activism from social media is often given the name “Twitter feminism” or “hashtag feminism” (Loza 2014, Kendzior 2014). For example, in 2015, Hannah Giorgis (@ethiopienne) created the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport to gather a community of rape and sexual assault survivors to share why they did not report the violence against them to the police. In addition to creating a space where they could support each other and validate their experiences, #WhyIDidntReport also called attention to the way society and the police further traumatize victims of sexual violence and take away their options for protection. However, hashtags are used as conversation trackers and they organize users on platforms other than Twitter including Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr.

The distinctions between online activism and social media activism becomes important when we think about accusation of slacktivism, which I will discuss later in this project. As I will discuss in that section, it seems that most activism taking place on social media that gets the reputation of being ‘slacktivist,’ rather than online activism broadly. However, the distinction is also important when we think about the kinds of participatory culture that takes place online generally and on social media in particular.

Imagine activist spaces online as a classroom. If we are learning about the work of the Electric Intifada or SisterSong, you might find yourself sitting in a lecture hall with your professor speaking at the front of the classroom. Reading posts from the organizations may be similar to listening to a lecture, while commenting on the website pages is similar to raising your hand to make a comment in class. Social media, on the other hand, is more like an interactive seminar. The initial act of posting a message on social media is like whoever starts the

conversation in the room. Through reblogging, retweeting, and commenting on the initial post, you are learning through interaction with fellow students.

This is not to say that the distinctions I am drawing are clear cut. They are not clear; rather, they're incredibly murky. But this murkiness is not something to be concerned about, as the online spaces we are working with are relatively new and the ways we use them are in flux. A time may come when having a distinction is not useful. However, for the sake of my project, it is useful to have distinctions between the two so that we can have a framework for recognizing where certain issues are taking place and what the benefits are of activism through social media.

### *Activism on Social Media*

Looking at the activists that utilize these applications in their work, social media has a few advantages for simplifying activities in activism. As Hannah Giorgis has shown with the creation of #WhyIDidntReport, using hashtags can help build community at the same time as call attention to issues in women's lives and re-center women in those issues. With the hashtags, groups can be in constant movement together, rather than the whole group having to get up and move. Additionally, women can author their own narratives and reclaim some journalistic power on their own time and at little financial cost to them (aside from the cost of technology and the service to connect online). Although, later in the project I argue that activism on social media does engage in high risk, high cost action.

The ability of social media to restore journalistic power to marginalized voices is brought out in Susana Loza's "Hashtag Feminism, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the Other #FemFuture" (2014). As Loza notes, "#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen 'inadvertently granted women of color permission to express the pain of being silenced and ignored and dismissed, of being relegated to a footnote in a movement that promised sisterhood.'" Mainstream feminism

has been dominated by white women's narratives, and women of color, black women especially, have been calling attention to this in American feminism since its foundations (Loza 2014). Sojourner Truth called attention to white feminists' racism in 1851 when she asked "Ain't I a Woman," and the conversation has continued through 1977 with the Combahee River Collective's statement and into today with the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. However, I do not take this reclamation of journalistic power to be 'inadvertent,' as Loza claims, nor do I think women of color were ever granted 'permission.' The comments one can plainly see in response to the work women of color do online is one reason to believe that they were never given 'permission,' and also argues that it was not inadvertent. Rather, this work is intentional and well-thought out, with full knowledge of the repercussions. Just because everyone is allowed to have accounts on Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram does not mean that every is equally free from close policing by other users, as I will show in a later section of this project.

While discussing the racism in white feminism is not new, the hashtag has given women of color a new platform of engagement where they can take power of amplifying their own voices. Loza quotes Mikki Kendall's conviction that "Twitter is changing everything. Now, people are forced to hear us and women of color no longer need the platform of white feminism because they have their own microphones" (2014). No longer dependent on others to tell their story, women of color reclaim control of their message through social media, which further shows the racism in mainstream feminism. Using the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, Rania Khalek (Loza 2014) used her space on Twitter to ask "What does it say that a twitter hashtag is giving more voice to WOC than feminist orgs and media outlets?"

In addition to documenting issues, social media activists also report on events of injustice in real time, or call attention to events planned in the future. For example, Bree Newsome and

James Tyson's protest and consequent arrest went viral when, on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the two collaborated to take down the confederate flag raised in the state capitol in South Carolina (Democracy Now 2015). Photos were snapped of Newsome climbing the flag pole and shared on social media, documenting the event in celebratory tones.

With this comes greater ease in consciousness raising efforts, calls to write letters to local government officials, sharing petitions and crowdfunding, acts of international solidarity, and organizing protests. In quick response to Newsome and Tyson's arrest after taking the confederate flag down, an Indiegogo account was made to crowdsource bail finds for the two. Within eight days, the account surpassed the \$20,000 goal and totaled over \$125,000. (Indiegogo 2015) Tumblr and Facebook have often been used for letter writing campaigns, where longer text posts allow people to share address information as well as letter templates for those who would like to write in. Protests against police brutality in the US find solidarity with resistance in Palestine with hashtags like #Baltimore2Palestine. Advice on how to cope with tear gas is shared between protesters internationally, as well as stories like this one shared by @BlackShiite: "Last night in jail I (Black) was wearing a #Palestine T-shirt sitting next to a Palestinian wearing a #BlackLivesMatter T-shirt. #NYCRiseUP."

The ability of social media to bring attention to events planned in the future and aid in organizing protests shows how social media activism can move from online spaces to offline ones. This was especially important for the CeCe Support Committee, which formed in response to CeCe McDonald's arrest after she defended herself from a racist and transphobic attack which left her attacker dead (Fischer 2016). Using the hashtag #Free\_CeCe, the CeCe Support Committee was able to give McDonald a platform to speak while she was in prison and document the events of her trial. Additionally, the social media space allowed them to "create

alternatives to existing communication infrastructures and to direct people towards specific sites of protest such as rallies in front of the Hennepin County courthouse” (Fischer 2016). As mentioned in the introduction, social media activism is often accused of being ineffective, however, Mia Fischer shows how this is not the case. In “#Free\_CeCe: the material convergence of social media activism,” Fischer points out how social media was used to orchestrate protests, which lead to “bodies protesting, bodies being surveilled, contained, and incarcerated” (2016). These are all elements of risk that are often valued in activism and seen as missing in online and social media activism (Halupka 2014). Yet, Fischer shows how risk is very much involved, especially when activism online is able to organize offline.

One may argue that once protesters come offline, then it is no longer social media activism. However, as I argue social media activism is defined more from its beginnings rather than ends, it remains social media activism even after moving offline. The beginnings of the movements have an influence on how they continue, and their organizing strategies will reflect that influence. It is too early in the life of social media activism to say so for certain, but I argue that the early development on social media will influence those movements to keep strong, collective voices and reimagine a new kind of leadership. The potential for reimagined leadership forces us to take a second look at the accusations made against social media activism.

Because of the ability of marginalized voices to restructure the narratives, as Susana Loza has shown, social media activism allows activists to create media outlets different from traditional ones, and with their goals in mind. Mia Fischer’s article demonstrates this advantage of social media also, when she explains how the CeCe Support Committee used social media to provide counter narratives to the ones spread by traditional media outlets.



Fischer quotes the description of the “media regime” by Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini and explains its importance to the narratives the general public hears. She says that the media regime is “a ‘historically specific, relatively stable set of institutions, norms, processes and actors’ that function as gatekeepers in determining how and what type of information passes” (2016). Additionally, Fischer refers to the importance of *Democracy Now* picking up the story to explain the role that corporate media has in defining what content we should consider “meaningful and rewarding.” This media regime and this corporate media that Fischer is talking about is media as we traditionally conceive of it. When the media of an oppressive system has historically controlled what information is passed on to the public, and has had an influential role in how that content is valued, marginalized voices are lost and injustice is justified.

The CeCe Support Committee knew the reality they faced in social media, and so set to work in reconstructing the narratives told around CeCe McDonald. Fischer tells us that the committee used social media to write the real narratives, fully aware that it would hinder McDonald’s ability to have a fair trial, if she ever could have had one. The Support Committee “was aware that the only way to exert pressure on the charges against McDonald was to provoke public debate about the disposability of a transgender woman of color trapped in the justice system” (2016). Using Twitter to tell her story allowed for people to share and spread through retweeting, and the committee kept a visible record of the conversation that took on the stereotypes, racism, and transphobia at play in traditional media.

The ability of social media to reframe the stories told by traditional media is what distinguishes the two. As Williams and Carpini point out with their description of the media regime, traditional media tells a specific story. As Fischer shows, this media regime allows corporate media to decide what we should value. Together, these two ideas make traditional

media the perfect servant of an oppressive system; the media regime can reinforce an oppressive system's injustice by telling stereotyped stories, and then, under the guise of objectivity, use those stories to justify their injustice. Social media, on the other hand, can be used to criticize and rewrite those narratives. As a platform populated by independent individuals, social media activists are never considered objective, which gives them the ability to speak from their experiences. Traditional media tells the story of a group of people, but on social media, people tell their own stories.

Additionally, with social media, the news we are exposed to is diversified and further differentiates social from traditional media. As Nic Newman, William H. Dutton, and Grant Blank explain in "Social Media and the News: Implications for the Press and Society," "there has been an explosion of comments, blogs, votes, and petitions that add vibrant new voices and perspectives to what has traditionally been the preserve of a small number of news professionals" (2014). In some ways, as Newman et al. continue to explain, those on social media may even be in a better position to give details on breaking news. Professional journalists are often kept distant from events, while "an amateur with a camera" is able to get closer. When amateurs with cameras are able to closely record events, the footage can be used to verify the messages of activists and put a spotlight on stories that might otherwise go untold.

It seems like these amateurs with cameras are doing important work, as well as the groups starting campaigns over social media, spreading news about events, and organizing protests. So what is going on when these people doing such important work find themselves so harshly critiqued? One critique in particular is that around the claim of 'slacktivism,' which often pits online activism, social media in particular, against traditional activism. In the next sections, I

will look at the tensions between traditional and social media activism, and then introduce and argue in support of social media activism against accusations of ‘slacktivism.’

## A Comparison of Traditional Movements and Social Media Activism

Although social media activism is often denied its right as activism and is feared a slippery slope into non-action, it does have some similarities with traditional activism, as well as points of tension. In this section, I will first consider some ‘lessons learned’ from the civil rights movement, a traditional activist movement composed of many campaigns. Then, I analyze those lessons in comparison to social media activism. Through this comparative look, I show the ways in which social media activism does resemble traditional activism and in which ways the differences between the two might be a strength for social media activism.

### *Similarities Between the Civil Right Movement and Social Media*

When we think of activism and activists of movements, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement usually comes first to people’s minds. Given the continued focus on anti-racism in today’s activist movements through #BlackLivesMatter, the lessons we learned from the civil rights movement are particularly salient. In their paper “Lessons of the Civil Rights Movement for Building a Worker Rights Movement,” Aldon Morris and Dan Clawson draw out several lessons I find significant for this project (2005). The premise that Morris and Clawson are working on is that the rights of oppressed groups “can be won only through a mass-movement taking risks and engaging in direct action” (2005). I take this premise to be true and argue that social media activism does engage actively and directly, and with high risk later in this paper. With this common ground, I can begin to draw parallels and perpendiculars between the lessons of the civil rights movement and social media activism.

The first lesson from the civil rights movement as told by Morris and Clawson that I would like to focus on is that “The civil rights movement succeeded, because it generated the power necessary to overthrow the Jim Crow regime. That power derived from the ability of the civil rights movement to create social disruption” (2005). Whether or not one thinks that the civil rights movement was successful because of its overthrowing the Jim Crow regime, it isn’t difficult to see the important role that social disruption played in the accomplishments of the civil rights movement. Social disruption forced people to recognize the determination of activists and made clear that they were not asking for change, but demanding it (2005).

This aspect of social disruption is something that the civil rights movement shares with social media activism. As more and more of our lives take place in the online sphere, the hashtags that go viral can also be considered a social disruption. When you cannot log on to your social media accounts without seeing conversation around the hashtags, your social space has been disrupted. However, we can also look to examples of social disruption that has come offline and has become more visible.

Activists using #Ferguson in response to the murder of Michael Brown, and continued using it after the decision to not indict Darren Wilson, created a display of public anger that could not be ignored by law officials. With the hashtag, activists did not let Michael Brown’s murder fall out of the public’s consciousness. Multi media documentation of events and testimonials were shared widely and created a story that national headlines could not ignore (Brewster 2014). In fact, the disruption that #Ferguson began led President Obama to request police officers wear body cameras, the passing of an act requiring the documentation of deaths in police custody in the senate, and retraining programs across the country that consider patterns of police violence in communities (2014). Although it is too soon to say whether this social

disruption has led to success of a movement (as no one would claim it has been successful yet), the movement is still young and we can admit its potential to bring success given the history of success that social disruption had in the civil rights movement.

Another lesson of the civil rights movement is that, despite not being a bureaucratic organization, it was not unorganized or spontaneous by any means. Rather, the civil rights movement was “an organization of organizations, formed around a particular struggle” (Morris and Clawson 2005). When we think of the civil rights movement, the Black Panther Party, NAACP, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In addition to them were other groups, like the Montgomery Improvement Association, as Morris and Clawson explain. While the groups did not always agree, coming together in the movement allowed for a range of strategies that proved important for the civil rights movement (2005).

Current day activism against racism and police brutality on social media is also organized through a multiplicity of non-bureaucratic groups through hashtags. Although each one comes together from a different perspective and unique strategy, they all share that same goal, just like the groups of the civil rights movement. Some hashtags mobilize around localized events of racism and police brutality by taking locations and people as their name. For example, activists have used the hashtags #Ferguson and #Baltimore to organize around the murders of Michael Brown and Freddy Gray at the hands of police. Activists have also used the hashtags #TrayvonMartin, #MikeBrown, and #TamirRice to call attention to Michael Brown’s murder, as well as Trayvon Martin’s in Sanford, Florida and Tamir Rice’s in Cleveland, Ohio. Additionally, hashtags have been created that focus on racism and police brutality more nationally, and often take a third focus. For example, #SayHerName was created to organize around the forgotten and ignored stories of black women who are also victims of racism and police brutality (Workneh

2015). Then, we can also look at #BlackLivesMatter as an example of an organization of social media which, as one of its founders Alicia Garza explains, is “an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza 2014).

The fact that all of these hashtags have existed to target the same problem, and as seen in other parts of this project, often come offline in organized protests, shows that a range of strategies is included in social media activism. Just like the organizations that fought the same battles in different ways, each hashtag brings something different to the fight against racism and police brutality against black lives.

### *Differences Between the Civil Rights Movement and Social Media*

We’ve looked at two ways in which current social media activism against racism and police brutality is similar to the civil rights movement, but there are ways in which it differs. In some ways, the difference is a positive one for social media activism. In other ways, it is a lesson that current activism still has not learned from history.

One difference that social media activism has from the civil rights movement is one of funding. As Morris and Clawson explain, funding for the civil rights movement “came primarily by passing the hat at meetings and church gatherings, with ordinary people putting in as much as they could afford” (2005). Black churches and NAACP chapters were a significant source of funding in the movement’s early stages, which was later supplemented by alliances with other organizations (2005).

While social media activists do look to the community for donations just as the civil rights movement did, the need for funding where where social media activists get it is much different. When social media platforms are free to anyone with an electronic device and internet

access, social media activists already come to the movement with the tools they need. Additionally, tweeting before work and reblogging after does not require one to travel or lose part of one's paycheck. However, when the need for funding does arise, like in the case of bail and legal fees for Bree Newsome and CeCe McDonald, social media campaigns to raise money using crowdfunding sites like Indiegogo and GoFundMe have been instrumental in getting the money needed. In some ways, current movements around racism and police brutality are self funded and the number of people who can engage is only restricted to those with access to the required technology.

One difference between current social media activism and the civil rights movement is a controversial one; it is not clear whether the difference is a strength or weakness for social media. The difference is one of leadership. As Morris and Clawson explain, "Leadership is crucial to social movements. Leaders devise the strategies and tactics of movements," as well as become the spokespersons for the movements goals. In addition to aiding to the organization of a movement, leaders often give movements a sense of charisma that attracts media coverage, which is vital in gaining the platforms to demand change. All of these aspects of leadership are what made Martin Luther King such an influential leader of the civil rights movements, and a continued inspiration long after his assassination for movements today (Morris and Clawson 2005).

As many have noticed and criticized, social media activists do not have a leader; at least, not one like Martin Luther King. One might argue that #BlackLivesMatter creators Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi are three leaders that have come out of the movement on social media, but considering how they are rarely given credit for their creation of the hashtag and how it has since been coopted, I don't think anyone really considers them as leaders (Garza

2014). DeRay Mckesson might also top the list of possible leaders of #BlackLivesMatter, and has even been called such by the Washington Times (Chasmar 2015). However, as he has recently begun his campaign for the Baltimore mayoral election, it seems his eye for leadership is not tied to social media (Cohen 2016). It seems like current social media activism is missing out on the benefits that come with having leaders when we cannot name one for them.

Despite all the benefits to a charismatic leader that Morris and Clawson outline, it might be considered a good thing for social media organization like #BlackLivesMatter to be leaderless. In being leaderless, the future accomplishments of social media activism may focus more on the efforts of collectives, rather than just individuals. Angela Davis brings out this idea in her book *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016). As Davis explains,

Since the rise of global capitalism and related ideologies associated with neoliberalism, it has become especially important to identify the dangers of individualism. Progressive struggles- whether they are focused on racism, repression, poverty, or other issues- are doomed to fail if they do not also attempt to develop a consciousness of the insidious promotion of capitalist individualism. Even as Nelson Mandela always insisted that his accomplishments were collective, always also achieved by the men and women who were his comrades, the media attempted to sanctify him as a heroic individual. A similar process has been attempted to disassociate Martin Luther King Jr. from the vast numbers of women and men who constituted the very heart of the mid-twentieth-century US freedom movement. It is essential to resist the depiction of history as the work of heroic individuals in order for people today to recognize their potential agency as part of an ever-expanding community of struggle.

When leaders are associated with movements, especially charismatic ones, media focuses on that leader and the efforts of the men and women who worked alongside them are ignored. As the movement is no longer current and history tells the story, the focus on certain individuals becomes more profound. In addition to the leaders focused on being primarily men, this focus denies the heart of movements. Movements only exist through mass efforts, a truth upon which



Morris and Clawson premise their entire work. Mandela and King could not have been leaders of anything had it not been for the thousands of men and women who made the movements strong. It might not be such a bad thing if #BlackLivesMatter is remembered as a movement for and by black lives, without the tunnel vision. However, leaderless movements do not make an excuse to erase the contributions and labor of women of color in activism, a problem with a rich history that continues to repeat itself.

### *A Lesson Yet to Learn*

Despite all we have learned from the civil rights movement, there is one problem that both the civil rights movement and current social media movements share; namely, the ways in which women are silenced, relegated to limited roles as supporters rather than leaders, and have their work stolen. Additionally, a history of exclusion of women of color in feminist activism into today also points to the ways in which women of color are silenced particularly. In the following discussion, I will show how women of color have been ignored from traditional activism, which follows into social media activism today. From this, it becomes clear how identity plays a role in who is an authority and who gets to speak.

In her paper “No One Ever Asks What a Man’s Role in the Revolution Is: Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966-71,” Tracye Matthews discusses the ways patriarchy played out in the Black Panther party. However, she is careful to remind her reader that the way we organize, politicize, and theorize around gender today is not how activists did in the 1960s. She explains that activism must be understood in the historical and situational contexts it exists in, and that what we recognize as radical or feminist is not the same through history (Matthews 2001). Additionally, Matthews points to the fact that “Ideas about gender and gender roles were far from static” among a diverse group of people in the Black Panther Party,

and some did resist the patriarchal structure that others brought with them (2001). However, this does not mean that we cannot cast critical attention to the issues raised in historical movements, as women participated in them just as women continue to do today, and we can learn from admitting the history of women's exclusion.

As noted above, the Black Panther Party was a collective of people who brought in many different ideas about gender. Although some resisted gender discrimination in the party, many of them did bring in values that affirmed the patriarchy of the greater US culture. Although the Black Panther Party aimed to challenge oppression through gender and class as well race, the practice did not always match up with the theory. As a former member of the Party explains, "We could talk about it [...] But I don't know that we internalized it" (Matthews 2001). This meant that many women in the Black Panther Party "held low or no formal positions of rank," even when they were prominent activists in the Party and outside of it through their heroic actions (Matthews 2001).

Rhoda Lois Blumberg continues a discussion of the exclusion of women in revolutionary activism in "Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Reform or Revolution?" According to Blumberg, the early stages of a movement value "personal qualities and abilities" over other credentials, and so women are able to participate actively, rather than subserviently. However, as the movement develops a greater organizational structure, women begin to drop out of the picture and often do not reemerge until "declining phases of the movement, when personal costs tend to be high" (Blumberg 1990). She cites the example of Ella Baker, an NAACP activist who was asked to take on administrative responsibilities of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference until someone more credentialed could be found; however, those credentials were "male" and "minister" (Blumberg 1990). Additionally, despite the brave actions of women

activists like Diane Nash in SNCC and the crucial contributions they made, “no woman was elected to the top leadership post in SNCC” (Blumberg 1990).

Although it is clear from Matthews and Blumberg’s work that patriarchal values existed in traditional organizations of the civil rights movement, the blame cannot entirely be given to the movement. Media reporting from the outside has also played a role in women’s erasure from the movements both during the time period and as the movement is historicized, a fact which both Tracye Matthews and Rhoda Lois Blumberg discuss.

A well known example of resistance in during the civil rights movement is the Montgomery bus boycott. What is less well known is that of all the known cases of resistance to segregation on Montgomery buses, none were male. Despite bus segregation being an issue that primarily affected black women, history shows that male dominance took over the narrative through the media. Although Rosa Parks’ story was organized around and she had been recognized for her resistance, it was Martin Luther King’s image and that of another male minister’s that the media used to cover the story once the boycott was won (1990).

Although many black women, like Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, had been arrested for their resistance to segregation, Rosa Parks “was the *perfect* woman to rally around” (McGuire 2010). Civil rights leader ED Nixon saw her potential as a “symbol of segregation in court.” He joyfully explained that when Montgomery police arrested Rosa Parks, they “arrested the wrong woman” (McGuire 2010). Parks was already devoted to and influentially involved in the movement, but Nixon noted that she also “could stand on her feet, she was honest, she was clean, she had integrity. The press couldn’t go out and dig up something she did last year, or last month, or five years ago. They couldn’t hang nothing like that on Rosa Parks” (McGuire 2010).

Rosa Parks was the perfect person to rally around because she could meet the demands of respectability politics.

However, the ability of Rosa Parks to be the “perfect woman” made room for men to silence her. As Rosa Parks pressed charges and the Montgomery Bus Boycott began, those involved in her case and the boycott began to construct how she would appear to the press. It became convenient in more ways than one to portray Parks as a “symbol of virtuous black womanhood,” rather than the determined activist she truly was. This worked to garner the community support needed for a successful protest, but it also worked to create a character that reestablished black masculinity and chivalry. Rosa Parks became “a quiet victim” and a woman to protect, rather than a woman fit to lead (McGuire 2010).

Men of the movement soon created the Montgomery Improvement Association and took over leadership of the bus boycott that black women began, instating Martin Luther King as its president. King became the voice of the movement as Rosa Parks was shifted to the background. The men in leadership had intended Parks to be a symbol, and symbols don’t have voices. They made this clear to Parks when, after King gave a powerful speech on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1955, they presented Rosa Parks to a packed Holt Street Baptist Church. Parks asked if she should say a few words to the crowd and she was quickly informed that she had “had enough and [had] said enough and you don’t have to speak” (McGuire 2010). She was then presented to the crowd and held up as “the victim of this gross injustice, almost inhumanity, and absolute undemocratic principle” (McGuire 2010). In a few words, the radical and intelligent activist was erased to make room for the voiceless victim in need of rescue.

The disproportional focus on the contributions of men to the civil rights movement in media has continued into how the movement is portrayed in contemporary depictions. Tracey

Matthews gives the example of the film *Panther*, which tells the story of the Black Panther Party- the men's stories, anyways. As Matthews explains, the film "fails to treat in any substantial manner the role of women in the Party, not to mention the internal struggles over gender roles and sexist/misogynistic behavior" (2001). Although critics of the film point out the inaccurate representation of the Party and its efforts in regards to black women's oppression, they often replicated the same mistake in the language of their reviews. Matthews quotes a review which claimed that "it was believed that the greatest threat to the nation was a black man with a gun," and further comments that the film affirmed black masculinity in the Party (2001). Matthews concludes that "the critical presence and actions of female Panthers are virtually ignored, while the complexities of black masculinity are constrained by romanticized, flat images of angry, hard bodies with guns" (2001). In this way, the gender portrayals of the Black Panther Party served no one, except a contemporary box office's agenda.

While movements against systemic racism through Jim Crow laws and police brutality have historically struggled with gender, the feminist movement has equally struggled with race. Feminism in the US has primarily focused on white women's narratives, as Louise Michele Newman has discussed in her book *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (1999). In her work, she argues that "racism was not just an unfortunate sideshow in the performances of feminist theory. Rather it was center stage: an integral, constitutive element in feminism's overall understanding of citizenship, democracy, political self-possession, and equality" (1999). As she tells the story of women's suffrage in the US, it becomes clear how true this is. Heralded as a founder of American feminism, Elizabeth Cady Stanton firmly held that "The Negro should not enter the kingdom of politics before women, because he would be an additional weight against her enfranchisement" (1999). In the late 1860s,

Stanton brought out this fear as she called on elite white women to oppose the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments that did not extend suffrage to them. Some white women picked up her call to action when she exclaimed “if you do not wish the lower orders of Chinese, Africans, Germans, and Irish, with their low ideas of womanhood, to make laws for you and your daughters ... awake to the danger of your present position and demand that woman, too, shall be represented in the government” (1999). This led white women to feel a sense of betrayal and humiliation, which Mary Putnam Jacobi discussed in 1894- some thirty years later. Jacobi lamented that “From many points of view, it certainly seemed most absurd to invite a share in the Popular Sovereignty a million negroes only just emancipated from two hundred years of bondage, and who, moreover, had not themselves dreamed of demanding more than their personal liberty, their ‘forty acres and a mule’” (1999). White women feminists continued this lament over their supposed humiliation for many years after, as Mary Roberts Coolidge would do in 1912.

One of Newman’s motivations in her work was to point to how the racist beginnings of feminism have lingered into contemporary feminisms. She cites the example of Tammy Bruce, who was the head of the Los Angeles chapter of the Nation Organization for Women. During the trial of OJ Simpson, Bruce commented that “We don’t have to teach our children about race; what we have to teach them about is violence against women” (1999). The importance of Newman’s motivation also comes out in the statement written by the Combahee River Collective.

In the Black Feminist Statement written in 1977, the Combahee River Collective addresses white women’s feminism and the issues that black women have been speaking out against since the 1800s (if not before). The state

One issue that is of major importance to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

In their statement, the Combahee River Collective calls white feminists out for their racism and demands that white feminists take seriously their responsibility to unlearn their racism. However, as we look forward into the 2010s, it becomes clear that white feminists have not.

Unfortunately, white women have still not taken responsibility for the racism perpetuated in the movement and gender structures still privilege male voices in anti-racism movements. The erasure of credit due to Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi for the creation of #BlackLivesMatter and the reasons for #SayHerName is evidence of the gender hierarchy that still privileges male voices within movements. Additionally, the event that inspired the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen brings to the forefront the still lingering racial privilege that white feminists have inherited, benefited from, and refused to acknowledge since the 1800s and which prevents any solidarity from actually developing between white women and women of color. However, some women, like Susana Loza, think that there is still hope for social media to aid in overcoming the history of oppression within movements.

Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as an "ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (Garza 2014). Using the hashtag, the three women created a space to celebrate black lives which have been devalued and dehumanized for centuries, and has since been taken off the boundaries of online spaces and onto

the streets (Garza 2014). However, as #BlackLivesMatter picked up popularity, various groups have appropriated the hashtag for their own purposes. As Garza explains, their work was soon adapted to slogans such as “all lives matter, brown lives matter, migrant lives matter, women’s lives matter,” among others (2014). Additionally, organizations asked Garza, Cullors, and Tometi to use the hashtag in their campaigns, which the three agreed to on the condition that “they acknowledged the genesis of #BlackLivesMatter” (2014). The organizations who requested to use the hashtag for their campaigns did not comply.

Another problem that erased the voices of Garza, Cullors, and Tometi in their creation of #BlackLivesMatter is the way it has been applied to amplify the stories of black men who have been victims of police brutality, while not equally amplifying the voices of black women suffering the same oppression. The hashtag has left black women and girls an afterthought, as those tweeting and posting focus on black men. As Kimberlé Crenshaw explained to HuffPost Live, “We don’t have existing frames to understand and talk about black women. If people don’t have a frame, they forget the facts” (Workneh 2016). In an effort to provide such a frame, activists have begun a campaign to remember black women in particular with #SayHerName. In this way, black women on social media have been able to publicize their erasure in activist movements. Similarly, women of color have been able to use social media to call out white feminists for their racism in activism with hashtags.

Despite all the hope that feminists have had that social media activism could help in overcoming the hierarchical structures that are routinely uploaded into social movements, women of color, black women in particular, still face attempts to silence them as others speak louder. However, as women of color continue to speak there may be renewed potential for activism on social media, as Susana Loza discusses with #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen.



The hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen came out of a conversation around white feminists' continued support of white men at the cost of women of color. Focusing on the story of Hugo Schwyzer, a white man who had a public voice as a feminist that he used to uplift white women and put women of color down, and all the white women online who supported him. As Loza explains, the hashtag "was also meant as a stinging rebuke to American feminism's brand of solidarity, one which 'centers on the safety and comfort of white women' at the expense of women of color" (Loza 2014). As discussed in this project, this critique of white feminism is nothing new, and the ability of social media to further perpetuate white feminism's racism is a bit worrisome for those who have looked to it for hope. However, Loza gives hope a second chance in her answers to the questions "Is mainstream feminism destined to remain the terrain of white women? Or can digital media praxis of women of color, their hashtag feminism and tumblr activism, their blogging and live journaling, broaden and radically redefine the very field of feminism?" (Loza 2014).

As she investigates the answer to these questions, Loza reminds readers that "Social media has made it possible for women of color to speak to each other across borders and boundaries" (Loza 2014). When social media allows a national and transnational critique of white feminism in the West to take place with relative ease, it's hard to deny the power it could have in transforming feminism in meaningful ways, whether or not it is able to completely address the need. Loza continues to investigate and critique the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, particularly the consequences of the language it uses. However, I would like to turn attention to one problem that does come out of hashtags like #SayHerName and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen.

Many, myself included, want social media to help fix the tensions that have taken place in traditional movements between structures of gender and race and responses to those structures. From the work of Susana Loza, and many of the stories I attempt to uplift in this project, it's clear that social media does have the potential to address those problems. However, feminists of color, black feminists in particular, are still always at the burden of calling out and educating men of color, white men, and white women. As the Combahee River Collective stated that they would "continue to speak and demand accountability on the issue," they also demanded that white women (which can also be extended to men of color) take responsibility for their own racism and misogyny. It is not clear that social media is able to facilitate that any better than Sojourner Truth was able to when she declared "Ain't I a Woman."

Despite this problem, it would be wrong to ignore the assertions that women of color are making that online spaces do help facilitate change, and we cannot ignore the important dialogues they have already opened on social media. This leads us to wonder whether we should look to social media activism as a new structure and resist what has come before in traditional movements. Is social media merely a new option for activism, or does it become a new framework to replace an old one?

Positioning social media activism as something to replace traditional activism seems unnecessarily competitive, and a bit implausible. As seen in other section of this project, many people do not think social media activism can be effective, so the idea of it replacing traditional activism seems a bit far fetched. Additionally, it shouldn't want to. Both kinds of activism have the same goals at it's root; inspire social change leading to justice. We should spend more time thinking how a collaboration of the two can strengthen activism. However, I would push against the idea of accepting social media activism easily into traditional movement structures, with the

only difference being modern technology. Given the accusations of slacktivism discussed in the next section, a better project is to legitimize social media activism in its own right, rather than legitimize it by grouping it with something easier for people to swallow.

## Accusations of Slacktivism

### *A History and a Definition*

Slacktivism is a term leveraged against activists, especially those organizing online. Although it is not known exactly where the term originated, ‘slacktivism’ is generally attributed to Fred Clark and Dwight Howard. During a seminar they offered in 1995, the two used ‘slacktivism’ to shorten ‘slacker activism,’ which referred to “bottom up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale” (Christensen 2011). Although Clark and Howard did not use it with a negative connotation, ‘slacktivism’ has since acquired one, and a new definition to match.

In her article “Put the Debate about Slacktivism to Rest,” Hahrie Han traces the popular use of ‘slacktivism’ and its evolution toward negative connotations. She explains that it came into popular use “from a debate about what value there was to all those people who were willing to click a few buttons to express their outcry over the shooting of Trayvon Martin or participate in the ALS ice-bucket challenge—but do nothing else” (2014). From the definitions of slacktivism proposed from this debate, it becomes clear that when we say that someone or something is ‘slacktivist,’ we are deciding that clicking buttons to express outcry does not have much value at all.

Slacktivism is now used to generally describe “support of a political or social cause” that is not considered to be making very serious time or involvement commitments (Franklin 2014). In *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Paolo Gerbaudo discusses

Evgenyi Morozov's work in expanding on a more detailed definition. According to Morozov, slacktivism describes activism that does not have an influential impact on society and social movements, and which has "feel good" behavior at its core (2012). Continuing the discussion, Max Halupka adds to the definition with the work of D. Rotman. Although he uses the term clicktivism, Halupka further explains why people often feel uncomfortable with considering social media activism as 'real' activism by referring to risks and costs, which contributes to ideas of "feel good" behavior in slacktivism. He explains that "low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity" is the basis of slacktivism, where traditional activism is seen to require high-risk, high-cost activity (Halupka 2014). It is unclear what Rotman, and consequently Halupka, are taking to be "low-risk, low-cost activity." What they may have in mind are the petitions signing and letter writing campaigns, which may not follow a signer or writer after the initial act. Additionally, in working online, it appears that social media activists avoid the physical violence and surveillance that sometimes comes with traditional activism.

### *A Defense Against the Accusation*

First, I address the claim that social media activism allows activists to avoid the surveillance that partially gives traditional activism its element of 'high risk' commitment. Although the internet is an infinitely large space for people to gather and create, making anonymity possible, that does not mean tools have not been developed to watch and track the way people use the internet and this surveillance comes from multiple sources.

Internet users often partake in their own forms of surveillance of each other's internet use. On the internet, it is not uncommon for feminists who publish posts, videos, and photos with political goals to receive harassment and threats from other users. Although she does not

represent the kind of social media I am examining, the response to Anita Sarkeesian's *Feminist Frequency* YouTube channel, and the Kickstarter that was created to develop it, is a visible example of how this kind of surveillance works and what it looks like. In the afterword to *Feminist Surveillance Studies*, Lisa Nakamura tells how Sarkeesian used her space on social media to call attention to the patterns of misogyny in video games. Upon doing so, video gamers on the internet "flooded the Internet with death threats and user-generated video games that invited users to punch and bruise Sarkeesian's face," as well as personal messages that had been sent to her with similar content (2015). Sarkeesian's harassers sought her out in every domain they could find her on the internet, including her email, Facebook, Kickstarter page, YouTube account, Wikipedia page, as well as her own website (Wofford 2014). As Sarkeesian continued her work, the threats continued and got much more frightening, ultimately requiring her to leave her home and cancel a speaking engagement (2014).

Although the reporting on it has died down, the internet is an eternal space and we should not assume that Anita Sarkeesian does not continue to receive threats and be monitored by hostile video gamers. Unfortunately, the threats Sarkeesian received happen all the time online. The only thing uncommon about what happened to Sarkeesian is the number of threats she received and the visibility it got in news reporting. The truth is that this kind of user-against-user surveillance happens all the time, and all you have to do is read the comments on YouTube videos and text posts to see it.

Additionally, internet users can track the movements of other users on their sites, as well as their IP addresses using trackers like StatCounter. Such tracking applications allow internet users to know the date, precise time, and location of visitors on their websites, as well as their locations down to the city, the system their technology operates on, and the host name. For

example, using StatCounter on my own blog page, I know that someone in Montréal in Quebec, Canada visited my page at 12:43:20 on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February, using the Safari application on their iPad. Those with more technological know-how can further narrow down the specifics of a person's location enough to stalk them offline. In light of this, it does not seem like social justice organizing on social media platforms helps activists avoid surveillance and risk at all.

Although StatCounters can be used by harassers to victimize social media users, especially social media activists, such applications are also used by social media activists so that they can track the movement of hostile visitors on their pages. On blog sites like Tumblr, users have the ability to send each other messages anonymously. While this capability can lead to more open discussion, it can also make bloggers vulnerable to harassment and threats by anonymous users. Using tracking applications can help the victims of such harassment keep themselves safe by knowing where the harasser is physically located and having a basis upon which to make a police report if necessary.

The story continues when one takes into account the police surveillance of activists online. Although the event reporting and organizing aspects of social media can be counted as a benefit, it can also be counted as a risk factor. Without public consent, police departments across the country have been using software to monitor activist activity on social media. Like StatCounter, police departments can track social media users' movements, but their technology is much more advanced and can be used against users in legal contexts. The American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California has reported on social media surveillance in Fresno, which has tracked #BlackLivesMatter in particular. Using software programs like Beware and MediaSonar, police identify social media users and decide if they are a threat to public safety or not (Cagle 2015).

Software like Beware, Matt Cagle explains, is still experimental but “gathers information on a person’s publicly available social media activity, and assigns them a threat level of green, yellow, or red. Marked as a source of insight for officers on the ground, this mysterious software can label people as threats based on inaccurate information” (2015). Although different software does different things, the programs work by scanning content posted on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Further, MediaSonar included hashtags they would encourage monitoring in their promotional materials, including “#blacklivesmatter, #dontshoot and #imunarmed” (Cagle 2015).

The fact that surveillance of social media users takes place between users and through police departments shows that organizing on social media is not as anonymous and low risk as it is often assumed to be. Sometimes, what you post on your social media pages can follow into your daily life and have serious consequences, especially as employers and insurance companies also monitor your activities. For example, a Canadian woman suffering from depression received disability benefits until her insurance company decided that she looked too happy to be depressed in her Facebook profile picture (Nakamura 2015). It is not hard to imagine how social media activists’ activities could be used against them when applying for jobs, when looking for insurance coverage, and when looking for legal recourse.

Accusations of slacktivism also come out of worries about the effectiveness of social media activism. Consider the claim of Dennis McCafferty when he says that social media activists are “happy to click a like button about a cause and may make other nominal, supportive gestures. But they’re hardly inspired with the kind of emotional fire that forces a shift in public perception” (2011). However, it seems like activism online is able to force a shift in public perception. For example, the Ohio State University’s Department of English has just led a

number of conferences centered around and using the language of the #BlackLivesMatter movement that Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi began. While OSU's English department may not represent the opinion of the greater community at large, English is still a community of people who have not always made efforts to value black lives.

#BlackLivesMatter also shows an ability to force a shift in public perception when it has become a visible conversation in the 2016 presidential election, particularly through the democratic candidates. #BlackLivesMatter protestors made an impact early on in the campaign of Bernie Sanders when, in August of 2015, they interrupted democratic candidate Bernie Sanders' rally in Seattle, effectively shutting it down and claiming its space as a grassroots movement (Seitz-Wald 2015). Hillary Clinton also had #BlackLivesMatter in mind early in her campaign. While #BlackLivesMatter protestors shut Bernie Sanders' rally down, Clinton spoke with them at an event of her own about racism and where the movement should go from here. The representatives of the movement did not appreciate what she had to say and the condescending nature of her message, yet their message has still had enough impact in public opinion that Clinton knew to address it from the beginning (Miller 2015). The message of #BlackLivesMatter has such an influence in current public opinion and conversation that President Obama has announced that Americans "have to take it seriously" (Cohen 2015).

It is also difficult to maintain that social media activism is not effective when the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Association publically thanked the three million donors who helped them raise \$100 million in just 30 days with the ice bucket challenge. The challenge went viral on social media to bring awareness to the disease, more popularly known as Lou Gehrigs disease, and encourage people to donate for further research. As the association explains, Lou Gehrigs "is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the



brain and the spinal cord. Eventually, people with ALS lose the ability to initiate and control muscle movement, which often leads to total paralysis and death within two to five years of diagnosis” (ALS Association 2014). The challenge asked social media users to pour a bucket of ice water over their heads and post the video on social media, donate to the association, or both. In the announcement, the ALS association described the hope that the donations inspired and research that the funds will be used for.

As I mention in the preface of this project, my experience in attempting activism online ended quickly as I discovered how much work and commitment it required that I did not have the time nor energy to give. This seems at odds with the slacktivism-accuser’s claims that activism done on social media is nothing more than a few clicks, and an attempt to feel good. This issue is further addressed in Lisa Nakamura’s essay “The Unwanted Labor of Social Media: Women of Color Call Out Culture as Venture Community Management” (2015).

At the start of her essay, Nakamura powerfully claims “Cheap female labour is the engine that powers the internet” (2015). She claims this to be true on two fronts. Cheap female labor powers the internet in as much as the electronic devices needed to engage online are disproportionally made by severely underpaid women in East Asia. This side of labor and the internet found international attention in 2010, when fourteen Chinese digital laborers at Foxconn died and four others were injured after suicide attempts in response to their inhumane working conditions (Nakamura 2015).

However, cheap female labor also powers the internet when women are expected to produce content and educate others for free. Nakamura explains that “Women of color and sexual minorities who post, tweet, re-post, and comment in public and semi-public social media spaces in order to respond to and remediate racism and misogyny online are, like venture

labourers in the software business, knowledge workers” (2015). It is easy to see how activists’ work offline is difficult, and here Nakamura argues that it does not get any less difficult when it goes online.

As Nakamura points out, the work that activists do online is much more than a few easy clicks. It requires a lot of work and time to create the content and reply to others online, and it only gets worse when surveillance enters the picture. The work that activists, and particularly women of color, do on social media very often results in them “being harassed, trolled, and threatened on these fora,” and this requires users to engage in protective measures (Nakamura 2015). It is tiresome and emotionally draining hard work to monitor social media platforms for harassers and trolls, and then turn around and become an educator in the same space- especially when that education is not always wanted, even if it is important. Nakamura discusses the organizers behind #ThisTweetCalledMyBack, and discusses their claim that “the labor of educating white men and women about racism and sexism is difficult, valuable, and unappreciated” (2015). When you listen to activists on social media, it is really hard to see any truth in the claim that the work done on such platforms only amounts to ‘feel good’ behavior.

In her article “Slacktivism, clicktivism, and ‘real’ social change,” M.I. Franklin tells in no uncertain terms what she thinks of the charges of slacktivism. She explains that it is a term that “unites entrenched technosceptics and romantic revolutionaries from a pre-Internet or, more precisely, a pre-social media age as they admonish younger generations for their lack of commitment to ‘real’ social change or willingness to do ‘what it takes’ to make the world around them a better place” (Franklin 2014). Franklin assumes that many of those employing the term ‘slacktivist’ are older generations who do not understand how prevalent new technology is

becoming in our lives. While I do not think that it is only older generations who use this term against social media activists, I think that she does raise a good point about fear of change.

In a very short time, technology has redefined how we think of communication. Given how nearly everything we do involves some form of communication, technology has begun to reshape how we live our daily lives. As game developer Brianna Wu explains, “When I was a teenager in the ‘90s, your public square was the coffee shop. Today our public square isn’t a building. It’s Twitter. It’s Facebook. And the thing that’s on the line here is: Are women going to be included in shaping the future, or are we going to be silenced and basically bullied out of getting the vote?” (Rogers and Victor 2016). In sharing her story as a teenager in the ‘90s through to her story today, Wu highlights the fact that reality is changing with the development of technology, and women need to be a part of it. This makes online spaces a vital place of organizing for activists.

However, social media is still so new, even younger generations remember a time, and therefore an activism, without it. In a review of Twitter as it celebrates its tenth year, The New York Times’ Katie Rogers and Daniel Victor call Twitter a “cultural and political phenomenon” (2016). Cultural and political phenomena rarely happen smoothly and easily, so it is understandable to find some push back.

The agenda of activism always requires change, and for this reason, the concept of slacktivism was not invented with technology. As M.I. Franklin also explains, slacktivism at its core is generally considered “support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement” (2014). As long as activism has existed, there have been supporters of movements that add to the numbers but not the leadership. In this way, the concept of slacktivism has been timeless. However, ‘slacktivism’ is not only applied to those who do less

for a movement than others. ‘Slacktivism’ is applied generally to entire movements that organize through hashtags, and also activists doing significant labor online. For this reason, I believe that ‘slacktivism’ emerges when the fear of change from the activists’ goal combines with the fear of change from social media. The image of social media as requiring less effort gives those who want to push back against the movement a platform to criticize without saying “I don’t want an end to police brutality” or “women’s liberation frightens me.”

## Labor Practices on Social Media

On social media, there are a variety of ways in which activists can find a place for their work. Some activist work is better suited for some platforms than others, while some can be found universally throughout social media. There are countless labor practices on social media, for example, roles like memoir writers, consciousness raisers, signal boosters, community cultivators, solidarity organizers, documenters and journalists, analysts and librarians. Some of the work that these activists do may look like what the critics I have discussed in this project would call slacktivism, or clicktivism. Additionally, social media activists do not just choose one way to engage. Some on social media do their activism in multiple activist “jobs.” In this way, the distinctions between each job become quite murky, but it is important to acknowledge the different kinds of work social media activists do so that we can begin to see it as real labor.

In this section, I argue that each job activists do on social media is an important one for activist work in the day of emerging social technology. I look at the different kinds of labor that activists on social media engage in and where you might find them online. I do my best to provide examples, but many of the work these activists do coincides contributions of their personal lives, which do not have a place in this context. In honoring their privacy, I do my best

to work with deactivated blogs and blogs that do not also share personal posts. Finally, I discuss how these activists are able to maintain a community and keep their following engaged.

### *Activist Labor and its Importance on Social Media*

Memoir writers use social media blog spaces like Facebook and Tumblr to tell the story of their lives. Social media gives people a platform through which they can tell the world the ways that injustice is present in their lives. Bloggers can tell the raw truth about how race and gender impacts their daily lives, as well as class and sexuality, and all the intersections between them.

Examples of memoir writers on social media are everywhere, as most of the activist bloggers online do engage in memoir writing. For example, blogger Mehreen Kasana used her blog to write about her experiences of racist beauty standards in the US and in Pakistan through a poem (Kasana 2014). This poem garnered much attention online, so much so that it later came offline and was read in classrooms in Pakistan and South Africa (Kasana 2014). In telling her life experiences on her blog and the subsequent attention it received points to the importance of the job of memoir writers online. Many in the world can find themselves in the social media “memoir” of others, and that has great power in itself. In addition, people who do not share those same experiences learn more about the realities of people transnationally.

Another example of consciousness raisers on social media is the blog, *The Body Narratives*, which was run by Hana Riaz, Bilan Hashi, and Hardeep Jandu. Although their Tumblr blog has not been active since 2014, the three women described their project as a way to reclaim the experiences of their lives, and confront “crucial questions about the systems or structures that shape our relationship to our bodies” (Riaz). Their ultimate goal is to “uncover

how our bodies belong to ourselves,” and their blog does so by creating a space for women of color to share their unique experiences (Riaz).

Consciousness raisers can be found on any social media platform, as consciousness raising can be done in a short tweet or hashtag, as well as a longer post that inspires discussion about the systems at play in our lives. On Twitter, hashtags track the discussion while commentary in reblogs on Tumblr, shares on Facebook, and regrams on Instagram organize the conversation.

The memoir writing as described above can become a form of consciousness raising, but consciousness raising on social media can take other forms as well. For example, the Tumblr blog *Real Autism* recently published a post detailing the ways in which Autism Speaks is a harmful organization that does not listen to those with autism and misrepresents the disorder as a disease “worse than cancer” (Real Autism 2016). For those on Tumblr who do not know about the harms of Autism Speaks, or even know of the organization at all, the post serves to introduce a critical consciousness in social media users. It asks readers to recognize the power that organizations can have in speaking over the groups of people they claim to help. Sometimes, this kind of consciousness raising becomes a life changing experience in the lives of those who read it, and so the importance of this work on social media cannot be understated.

Community cultivators are often who we think of when we hear the term ‘slacktivist’ or ‘clicktivist.’ Community cultivators are the ones clicking like, retweet, and reblog, often without adding their own contributions to the original message (although they sometimes do). In doing so, community cultivators spread the word to others and uplift the presence of other posters who engage in other kinds of work, like consciousness raising. From their work, they cultivate a community as their endorsement of the original poster often leads other social media users to

follow the original poster. They help build the numbers of activists on social media. Although it may seem like they are doing nothing for activism, community cultivators and signal boosters are actually doing the same kind of work as those who make up the numbers of the march, but otherwise do not protest in any other way.

Community cultivators may also partake in another practice on social media called signal boosting. Signal boosters help spread the word when someone in the community needs support, emotionally or financially. On Tumblr, this work is often explicitly stated, as the post is reblogged with nothing written except “**SIGNAL BOOST.**” Thousands of examples can be found by searching “#signalboost” on Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Posts bring attention to petitions, events, Go Fund Me accounts, and other issues that social media users feel need greater attention. With the hashtag, the sharer does two things. First, it makes explicit their intentions in sharing the post. Additionally, the sharer ask that others also share it so that the message can reach a greater audience.

Community cultivators often work through their own personal blogs, and I do not find it appropriate to use another’s blog as an example. For this reason, I offer a Tumblr blog of my own which I no longer use, Kaymuhrie. On this blog, I was a community cultivator who reblogged the work of others to heighten visibility of the issues and original poster. Those who followed me would see the content I would share on my blog, and would engage with it in their own ways. They could reblog with or without their own additions, look into following the original poster, or look up more information on the issue and blog about it themselves.

The work of a community cultivator is most vulnerable to accusations of slacktivism, as community cultivators often do little more than clicking buttons. However, without them, posts

that detail injustice around the world could not go viral. Without community cultivators, social media activism could not gain the traction that it does.

Solidarity organizers on social media use the platforms to bring together groups of people and different movements online to create a united front against shared oppressions. To do this work, social media activists can organize a blog individually which engages with other bloggers to create a basis of solidarity. However, a more common form of solidarity organizing on social media is through a blog created by multiple activists with the goal of solidarity building.

The latter type is the kind that Tumblr blog Women of Color, In Solidarity uses to organize solidarity in the Tumblr community. Still active today, the moderators of the blog describe the project as a “safe space created by Women of Color, for Women of Color. We are a U.S.-centric blog, but we welcome the voices and experiences of all Women of Color, no matter where you are” (Women of Color, In Solidarity).

The work that solidarity organizers do on social media is important for opening communication across social media users and groups. Without the explicit or implicit work of solidarity organizers, #BlackLivesMatter might never have found support in and for the movements against occupation in Palestine (Khalek 2015). Solidarity organizers strengthen activist work on social media by bringing different groups of people together to fight for the same outcome, although the experiences and approaches that brought them to the fight may be different.

As discussed in earlier sections of this thesis, social media opens the opportunity to document the truth of the story while traditional media outlets ignore it. This creates a job for activists on social media as journalists and documenters. Their role in social media is to keep track of current events, offer reports that more closely align with the truth, and capture image and



video data if possible. For example, activists on Twitter use the names of victims of racist police brutality, as well as the cities involved, to track events in the aftermath and report on developments. After the murder of Freddie Gray, hashtags of his name as well as #Baltimore circulated to track the developments in his case, similar to how #Ferguson and #MikeBrown were used to document the investigation, protests, and lack of indictment in the murder of Michael Brown.

The work that documenters and journalists do on social media is important because they do so much the vital work in reclaim the narratives surrounding the experiences of the oppressed. This reclamation of narratives was key in fighting for justice for CeCe McDonald, and Mehreen Kasana further explains the importance of this work in “Feminisms and the Social Media Sphere.” Kasana explains that

The hegemonic control over discourse(s) is nothing new; prior to the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, mainstream media had already initiated a narrative that made the case for the United States' imperialist adventures. Not only did mainstream media remain complicit by advocating for the invasion and occupation of the two countries but it also carried on its role of obscuring the horrifying truth of war from American and global audiences. (Kasana 2014)

Kasana highlights the work of documenters and journalists in telling the untold stories. Additionally, this work demands the truth where it has been denied. Mainstream, traditional media kept the truth of what events and motivations became the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from the global audience, and through social media, activists can work towards meeting the need for truth (Kasana 2014).

On social media platforms, it is not uncommon to run into what might look like academic work. Often students in higher education, those with a skill for critical thinking and teaching can find activist work online. Like analysts for activism, many social media users use their blogs to

publish small articles that cast a critical eye on issues important to their communities and unpack legal and political jargon for their followers.

In the wake of the Panama Papers leak, many social media users with the required literacy to understand what the leak meant went to their social media accounts to help explain to their friends and followers what it all meant, what the motives may have been in the leak, and what impact may be seen in the following years. Another example is blogger [exgynocraticgrrl](#), who used her space to criticize the way feminist analysis is developing. She has since deactivated the blog, but her posts can still be found in an archive ([exgynocraticgrrl](#)).

The analysts of social media are important as they can help the journalists in the work they do. Many of the issues activists discuss on social media are very complex and require a kind of literacy that some in the community have not yet developed. Analysts, then, help others to build their critical thinking skills and understand the histories and complexities of our societies. The lens that they provide can be applied to the work of the journalists to add greater context and help in developing innovative ways of organizing against injustice.

Along with the work that journalists and analysts do, many bloggers make their spaces an accessible library. Collecting sources and posting them for others to read without paywalls and other institutional blocks, librarians aid in the education of those on social media and help to reconstruct the narratives around human experience.

An example of a social media librarian is the blog [Proletarian Feminism](#), who posts articles from newspapers and journals, excerpts from books, and sometimes access to eBooks for their following to read. The blog is focused on issues of feminism that discuss class and Imperialism, as well as the political systems and figures who create them and aim to destroy them. The Ebook Collective, although it has not been updated in some time, did similar work of

making eBooks available to anyone who would like to take their education into their own hands. Additionally, the blog Disciples of Malcom describes itself as a blog dedicated to sharing “History, World news, and words from several revolutionaries.” Offering both a historical and contemporary perspective, the blog aims to give a resource to bloggers from which they can learn and take their work off the internet space and to the streets.

It is common knowledge that traditional education that students receive in the primary and higher education systems often has hidden agendas and secret biases. I am not saying that these bloggers do not have their own agendas in mind in providing materials to their followers, however, they are up front about their agendas and offer alternative options for ones’ education. This makes their blog spaces a vital part of the activist blogosphere. In offering a space for people to further their activist education, librarians on social media help to honor the work of activists before us and keep our eyes on the efforts of today.

### *Building a Following*

Activists on social media do a variety of important jobs for activism; however, they could not do that work without a following. Although activists online can do important work without having thousands of followers, Mehreen Kasana shares how she came to build her following of thousands of readers. Kasana explains that

By the time I was in my late teens and had moved to the bustling heart of Lahore from a rather small city, I began blogging with no specific purpose in my mind; for me, it was simply to store my thoughts. After several posts, I gained popularity among the Pakistani blogging world for a post that humorously described the sociocultural meanings behind the certain ways Pakistani women don the *dupatta*. (Kasana 2014)

Her post was then picked up by journalists and spread widely, which further helped her to gain a large following online. Kasana’s posts resonated with other Pakistani bloggers, which lead to a growing following that soon reached an international audience (Kasana 2014). Kasana’s story on

social media shows that activists can build a following by posting content that others in their communities can relate to.

Connecting on a personal level to others is likely not the only way to build a community of activists on social media, but it is a very powerful one as it provides an alternative idea of the self that might not be found anywhere else and which gently introduces people to the structures that bind them. Additionally, it gives a personal basis upon which people can learn about the experiences of others globally and build relationships of solidarity. Building a following also does not have to be an individual effort, as it was in the case of Mehreen Kasana. Blogs can be run by collectives and build a following in the same way, as well as a group of bloggers can build a community where no one person places higher than another.

## Making a Case for Social Media Activism

Thus far in this project, I have established what social media activism is and what the types of interventions and points of engagement it with through. Then, I have discussed how that activism matches up with how traditional activism is generally conceived of through a comparative study of modern activism and the civil rights movement. With the conversation from those two sections in mind, I have made an argument against accusations of slacktivism, and from that note, I would now like to make a case for social media activism and discuss the potential it has in future social justice organizing while also raising a concern for social media activists.

### *Social Media's Potential for Activism*

Social media activism makes several important contributions to social movements through consciousness raising, community building, and enlisting solidarity across borders. Additionally, social media reimagines the way citizens engage with traditional media and

deciding what is important to talk about. From these efforts, social media activism makes significant changes to the role leaders play in social change.

Stacey Sowards and Valerie Renegar credit Kathie Sarachild as developing the group process of understanding social structures called consciousness raising in the early 1970s, which was utilized by feminists in what we call the “second wave” (2004). Sowards and Renegar explain that Sarachild originally developed consciousness raising as small, informal groups of women who met to “share their experiences through personal testimony in order to relate to one another and generalize experiences” (2004). More than personal therapy, consciousness raising “is a political action with a group solution” (Gunn 2015). As the groups progressed in their discussions, the topics moved towards “forms of resisting oppression, actions, and organizing new consciousness-raising groups” (Sowards and Renegar 2004).

Although social media reaches millions of users, and any consciousness raising groups that develop on social media platforms will not be small, hashtag campaigns do very much resemble the main goals of consciousness raising. Additionally, the change in size of consciousness raising groups may better reflect the needs and realities of people’s struggles in modern society. As more and more people go online, our personal worlds become much larger, and the people we interact with no longer need to be in our immediate distance. We can also develop consciousness raising groups internationally, as groups of people in two separate countries find commonalities in their shared experiences. With hashtags that facilitate easier tracking of conversations and the ability to create blogs around entire concepts, social media further develops consciousness raising for modern activists.

In “Hashtagging from the Margins: Women of Color Engaged in Feminist Consciousness-Raising on Twitter,” Caitlin Gunn discusses the way that women of color Twitter

users have used the platform to facilitate consciousness raising, and from their work have remedied many of the criticism of consciousness raising's history. Gunn describes social media as offering spaces for consciousness raising, but with the added benefit of addressing exclusionary practices that have historically problematized consciousness raising groups. She explains that "exclusionary attitudes prevalent in the second wave feminist movement may not have carried over into online feminist spaces, where traditionally marginalized voices have more opportunities to be heard in the center of feminist discourse" (2015). Like Susana Loza argued in "Hashtag Feminism, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the Other #FemFuture," platforms like Twitter allow women of color to organize with hashtags that speak to their experiences and make those hashtags go viral with their own clicks. Loza cites Mikki Kendall, who found that "Twitter is changing everything. Now, people are forced to hear us and women of color no longer need the platform of white feminism because they have their own microphones" (2014).

In addition to providing a space for consciousness raising, social media activism also facilitates transnational solidarity. As #BlackLivesMatter picked up on social media, activists in Palestine have connected with #BlackLivesMatter activists one and offline. In addition to Palestine, Syria, the Philippines, and Korea have also stood with activists protesting racism and police brutality worldwide. This solidarity comes out of shared experience, which activists have discovered through social media activism, and which has led #BlackLivesMatter activists to travel to Palestine in a public testament of support.

Rania Khalek explains that the "historic delegation," which went to Palestine in January 2015, "spent ten days linking up with Palestinian activists. The group witnessed first hand what it means to live under Israeli occupation and apartheid" (Khalek 2015). Explaining the motivations behind the delegation, #BlackLivesMatter founder Patrisse Cullors explains that

“The offering of visible solidarity is both healing and courageous and allows for our work as organizers artists, militants and healers to signal to both the State of Israel and America that the current movement for Black liberation is on the front lines of fighting against the occupation of Palestine” (Khalek 2015).

Another contribution that social media activism makes is its ability to redefine leadership in particular by re-envisioning who has the power to speak, create knowledge and become an authority. As Sarah Kendzior explains in “Blame it on the internet,” “‘Twitter activism’ is dismissed because the people who engage in it are dismissed – both online and on the ground in Western countries where few minorities hold positions of power. Media is one form of power, and hashtag feminism is an attempt to challenge the narratives that bolster discriminatory practices” (2014). Hashtag feminism, according to Kendzior, can make visible what has historically been dismissed and recenter our conversations on that dismissal. In this way, social media creates an opportunity for previously ignored epistemologies to be developed and new voices to find their way into public discussion. Without the need for credentials and pay blocks, social media creates a publishing platform that is user run.

Finally, social media activism reconstructs how the media portrays a movement and how we engage with leaders. Before social media, movements like the civil rights movement needed figures like Martin Luther King to garner media attention (Morris and Clawson 2005). Media has always been needed to direct public attention and decide what is important, but with social media, activists can do that themselves. It is not that traditional media is not still needed, as the CeCe McDonald case shows. If traditional media was not still important, the CeCe Support Committee would not have needed to launch campaigns to get media attention (Fischer 2016). However, to stay relevant and keep ratings up, traditional media needs to talk about what is

going viral online. Activists on social media have more power than ever to force their hand. In this way, social media activists are framing and deciding what is important to talk about. They challenge who gets to decide and who gets to direct our societal attention and mark things as problems.

Social media has the potential to bring so much more to activism than I have been able to describe in this project. With millions of users online, and thousands of them using the spaces to organize, I cannot retell every contribution they've made. Additionally, creators develop new platforms and new ways of engaging online almost every day. Likewise, users of social media platforms are equally as innovative as they discover new ways of interacting with others online. The creativity of those developing and engaging on social media has so much potential to change the way we communicate and organize, but much of their work will only be seen in hindsight.

### *A Note of Caution*

Despite all that social media activism contributes to activist work, activists organizing on social media also face new problems that can undermine the value of the work that they do. Micah White brings up an important challenge in his article "Clicktivism is ruining leftist activism" (2014). White claims that "this model of activism uncritically embraces the ideology of marketing," leading to the marketization of social change (2014). Although White's argument comes charged with insults of slacktivism that this project shows to be unsubstantiated, there is unfortunately much truth to his claims that social media activism risks marketizing social change.

Everyone with a Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter account (or even all of the above) knows how pervasive marketing is on social media. As bloggers, YouTubers, and Twitterers scroll through their feeds and dashboards, they are inundated with advertisements and



corporate social media accounts. While White expresses concern over this fact of social media, as each click adds to company revenue, there is another cause for social media activists to worry about marketization of activism.

In 2014, for-profit t-shirt company FUCKH8 introduced a line of shirts in response to Michael Brown's murder and the #Ferguson protests. The company promoted the line with a video of children from Ferguson wearing the shirts and a statement declaring that five dollars from each twenty-dollar shirt would be donated to "charities working in communities to fight racism" (Bogado 2014). Whether or not the company donates money to charities at all, FUCKH8's ability to profit off of activist efforts is something to be wary of. Additionally, even though FUCKH8 advertises itself as a company devoted to activist causes, it is owned by Synergy Media, a company with no such mission. With every dollar that FUCKH8 earns, Synergy Media profits and a culture of activism is created that supports the hierarchies of capitalism. It is common knowledge among activists that capitalism does not exist without oppression, but through social media, corporations have devised a way to capitalize on efforts to dismantle those hierarchies. As activist hashtags trend on social media, corporations gain the power to profit off of those efforts.

While Micah White raises a good point and social media activists should be cautious about the ways in which their work is marketized and profited from, that does not mean social media activism is a lost cause. This project has aimed to show how social media activism has been effective in organizing against social injustice, and I hope this project has also shown is the creativity of activists online. If social media activists promote a greater awareness about the reality of organizing within a capitalist economy, then those creative collectives deserve the chance to address the issue and reclaim the public space.

## Conclusion

As has been discussed in the previous sections of this paper, the goals of social media activism are not that different from what has been seen in traditional activism like the civil rights movement. Further, the claims that accusations of slacktivism make about social media activism often do not hold up. When analyzed, social media activism is just as highly monitored as traditional activism. There is just as much risk in organizing online as there is offline. With all this considered, one might wonder what the true motivations are in charges of slacktivism. Although some activists do believe that slacktivism is a problem, I believe that many people who use the term are using social media activism as a scapegoat to express their fears about social change. There have always been ‘slackers’ in social movements who benefit off the risks and labor of others, but we have not let that undermine movements historically. If this is true, ‘slacktivism’ is nothing more than a silencing technique to deem these activism illegitimate, rather than a legitimate criticism of activism and activists on social media.

Once we can recognize where the term ‘slacktivism’ truly comes from the the weight it has in our organizing, we can envision a way of retaliating. As of now, I do not know how the accusation of ‘slacktivism’ has hampered social movements on social media. The users comprising these movements do show an impressive amount of resilience and creativity, as I hope this project has shown. I do not think that the accusation of slacktivism has stopped them from doing what they know needs to be done. However, the accusation could have severe impact on social media’s ability to change public opinion more powerfully as it already has. President Obama telling America to take #BlackLivesMatter seriously shows a change in perception, but we need one more powerful than that. I want to consider the idea that without accusations of slacktivism, President Obama might never have needed to tell America that in the first place.

Technology has certainly had a revolutionary impact in the way we communicate and relate to our social world. There are generations of people who remember a time when social media as it exists today was nearly inconceivable living along side generations of people who don't remember a life without social media. As the new technology becomes more ingrained with our daily lives, it will change how we organize for social justice. The movements of the future will look very different from how they have in the past. The uploading of our world to online spaces is bound to inspire fear in some, but I ask that we keep open minds to all the good it can bring us as well.

With new technology, social media in particular, we are given a second chance in how we relate to one and other and communicate. With the ability to speak across vast distances almost instantly, no one can claim that we did not know what atrocities were going on in the world. No one can say for certain where the future will lead us, but I see potential in social media to create a transnational activism that has thus far been impossible. I also see continued potential for social media to uplift the voices of the marginalized and call attention to the historic silencing of those voices in powerful ways that we have yet to see.

Social media creates a threat to established systems of oppression as it changes who holds the microphone. 'Slacktivism' shows us that those who benefit from oppression know what it can do to their systems, and that tells me that activism is moving in the right direction.

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